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Serbia's Military Neutrality: Origins, effects and challenges

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Abstract

Serbia is the only state in the Western Balkans that is not seeking NATO membership. In December 2007, Serbia declared military neutrality and in spite of its EU membership aspirations, developed very close relations with Moscow. The objective of this paper is threefold. First, I argue that in order to understand why Serbia declared military neutrality, one has to look both at the discursive terrain and domestic power struggles. The key narrative that was strategically used by mnemonic entrepreneurs, most importantly by the former Prime Minister Vojislav Koštunica, to legitimize military neutrality was the trauma of NATO intervention in 1999 and the ensuing secession of Kosovo. In the second part of the paper, I discuss the operational consequences of the military neutrality policy for Serbia's relations with NATO and Russia, as well as for military reform and EU accession. Finally, I spell out the challenges ahead in Serbia's neutrality policy and argue that its decision makers will increasingly be caught between pragmatic foreign policy requirements on the one hand and deeply entrenched traumatic memories on the other.

KEY WORDS:

Serbia, neutrality, NATO, memory, trauma, intervention

Introduction

For all the Western Balkan states, the 20th century ended at the same time and in an equally dramatic way – with the implosion of the common Yugoslav state.[1] The period of break-up that followed was not equally intense and did not take equally long in all the countries; therefore, each of these new states began to tell political time at a different moment. For Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Dayton Agreement (1995) marked a new beginning, for Croatia it was Operation Storm (1995), for Macedonia the Ohrid Agreement (2001), and for Montenegro and Kosovo it was independence (2006 and 2008 respectively). All these countries made EU and NATO membership their central foreign policy objective in the new post-Yugoslav era. In Serbia, the *annus mirabilis* was the year 2000, when Slobodan Milošević lost the presidential election and was subsequently ousted in mass demonstrations on 5 October after he refused to recognize the electoral defeat. Although the changes initiated by this event were limited and gradual, in political memory this day symbolizes a break with the wars and isolation of the 1990s and the new era of democratic transition and integration. The initial post 10/5 enthusiasm largely stemmed from the expectation that Serbia would finally become a "normal" country and that although late, it would still take the path that had already been taken by other European post-Communist states. In his famous keynote address to the National Assembly on 24 October 2001, the first post 10/5 Foreign Minister, Goran Svilanović, clearly stated: "The main foreign policy of the FRY is focused on European and Euro-Atlantic integration processes" (Dragojlović et al. 2010: 278).

Today, 13 years later, the "European" part of this orientation remains the backbone of Serbia's foreign policy. Despite the slow pace, wandering and occasional setbacks in the process of European integration, Serbia became a candidate for EU membership in 2011 and started accession negotiations in January 2014. However, in the

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meantime, the "Atlantic" part of Serbia's foreign policy orientation of which Svilanović spoke was abandoned. Even though it became a member of the Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme in December 2006, Serbia proclaimed "military neutrality in relation to the existing military alliances" in a parliamentary resolution from December 2007 (National Assembly 2007). Internationally, Serbia's military neutrality has not been recognized by any state or international organization, above all because Belgrade did not invest any effort whatsoever in achieving this goal (Novaković 2012: 11). How can all this be explained?

In this paper, I demonstrate that the adoption of military neutrality policy in Serbia has been driven by the trauma of NATO bombing in 1999. Cathy Caruth defines trauma as an "overwhelming experience of sudden and catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled and repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (Resende and Budryte 2014: 2). Similar to other political traumas, the trauma of NATO bombing did not fade away with time. On the contrary, it only grew as the beginning of the operation was commemorated and victims mourned year after year. The memory of NATO intervention in 1999 as an aggression against Serbia was not only endorsed by post-Milošević governments but also incorporated into the very identity of the Serbian state. As Paul Williams writes, "it could be argued that memory is crucial in the construction of a sense of belonging, of where we come from and where we are going, that it is at the heart of all identity debates and, as such, that it should be at the heart of security studies" (Williams 2008: 506). The trauma of NATO intervention in 1999 was narrated first by the Milošević regime, presenting Serbia as a victim of western aggression. After the demise of the Milošević regime, NATO bombing gradually developed into a veritable formative event in Serbia's collective memory and thus was scripted into the collective identity narrative. Most importantly, Prime Minister Vojislav Koštunica endorsed the narrative, updated it for the post 10/5 era and translated it into the military neutrality policy. The trauma of NATO bombing thus became a backbone of Serbia's self-understanding and a driver of its relations, not only with NATO but also with the West more generally. Today, this collective memory complicates Serbia's relationships with its immediate neighbours and it's positioning within the wider European security

architecture. However, in order to understand how this collective memory is socially constructed within political institutions, one has to look at the role of mnemonic entrepreneurs, i.e. those who strategically use collective memories in order to achieve self-interested goals.

My argument unfolds in the following manner. In the first section I explain how and why Serbia declared military neutrality and why this policy has not changed thus far. Here, I will focus especially on the official policy discourse and political debates that surround it. In the second part, I discuss the effects of military neutrality on the operational side of Serbia's security and defence policy and spell out some challenges ahead.

The origins of military neutrality

The contemporary concept of military neutrality, or non-participation in wars and military alliances, is as old as the concept of sovereignty (Goetschel 1999: 119). Over the centuries, military neutrality has been a strategy followed by many small states that have wanted to preserve their sovereignty in the face of a balance of power among the great powers of the day. The concept lost much of its clarity with the end of the Cold War, especially in the European context. For example, three neutral states, Austria, Sweden and Finland, joined the EU in 1995. Their neutrality policy officially remained in place (as was the case with Ireland, Cyprus and Malta), but the concept itself lost its erstwhile precise meaning in the process of adaptation to the post-Cold War era and Europe's collective security needs.

Serbia's neutrality, declared in December 2007, is no exception to this: there has been much discussion about it but very little common understanding of what it actually means in practice. Moreover, these discussions are usually more normative than analytical as they serve to support or criticize, sometimes with an excess of emotion, rather than explain the policy of military neutrality itself. Opponents of NATO

membership, if they do not assume that military neutrality is self-evident "because of the bombing" or "because of Kosovo", defend this policy as an emanation of Serbia's national identity. Advocates of NATO membership, by insisting on the mundane and daily political motives behind the neutrality policy, often trivialize its origins and thus overlook a wider context that enabled the adoption of the policy and its perseverance over time. The majority of the articles that deal with this subject are journalistic pieces, while in several academic papers on military neutrality the issue had been covered only in passing. In these works, the main motives behind military neutrality that stand out are the "policy towards Kosovo", mentioned in the foreign policy sphere, and "gathering support" on the domestic front (Litavski 2012; Novaković 2012). However, if one wishes to understand how and why Serbia adopted a policy of military neutrality, it is necessary to go further and analyse the decision-making process that led to its adoption, but also to understand the discursive enterprise that enabled the formulation and legitimization of this policy and its survival to this day.

Why did Serbia proclaim military neutrality?

Until 2007, Serbia had never in its history pursued a policy of military neutrality. Even during the Cold War, Socialist Yugoslavia was among the founders of the Non-Aligned Movement, but it was not militarily neutral.[2] Moreover, it concluded the Balkan Pact with Turkey and Greece in 1953, effectively linking itself with NATO. The interwar Yugoslavia was also a member of the Little Entente with Czechoslovakia and Romania from 1920 to 1938. Going back further into the past, the Kingdom of Serbia also joined the Balkan Alliance with Bulgaria, Montenegro and Greece in 1912. Even medieval Serbia did not hesitate to enter military alliances with a variety of polities in order to resist and balance the Byzantine Empire.

2 On the difference between military neutrality and non-alignment, see Novaković (2011).

For many years after October 2000, military neutrality was not even present in the political discourse of Serbia. The official foreign policy priority of the state was Euro-Atlantic integration and the parties who opposed this goal did not propose neutrality but rather closer ties with Russia. This was the case, for example, with the far right Serbian Radical Party, the strongest opposition party, which advocated military alliance and maybe even integration with Russia, but not neutrality (Bakić 2007). The extent to which military neutrality was off the table in public discussions for many years is best illustrated by the fact that the printed media in Serbia hardly ever mentioned the term before September 2007, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Military neutrality in the printed media[3]

Year	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
No. of reports	*0*	*4*	*0*	*0*	*151*	*122*	*265*	*186*	*153*	*215*

However, it is important to note that during the first few years of democratic transition, the Euro-Atlantic narrative in Serbia explicitly referred to the EU, whereas NATO was only implicitly assumed. New democratic elites were probably consciously avoiding opening the topic of NATO membership, fearing that it would easily be linked by their opponents to the collective trauma of the NATO bombing of 1999. As there was no willingness to challenge the victimhood storylines created by Milošević and his regime, opening up the discussion on NATO membership was thus avoided as a dangerous enterprise from which only the nationalist opposition could gain immense political profit. What then happened that turned military neutrality from a non-issue in 2006 into an official policy of the Republic of Serbia in December 2007?

The answer to this question must be sought in the fate of negotiations on the final status of Kosovo. As a reminder, Kosovo had been part of Serbia since 1912 and is construed by Serbian nationalists as a "sacred

3 This covers all printed media in Serbia searched through the Ebart Media Archive. All the texts published in 2007 on military neutrality are dated September or later.

space" (Ejdus and Subotić 2014). In 1999, NATO intervened in the civil war between Serbian forces and Albanian guerilla fighters. As a result, Serbian forces withdrew from Kosovo and its administration was taken over by NATO and the UN. In 2006, negotiations on the final status of Kosovo began in Vienna under the auspices of the Special Envoy to the UN, Secretary General Martti Ahtisaari. As the sides failed to come to an agreement, only a few days after the parliamentary elections in Serbia in February 2007, Ahtisaari presented his plan envisaging supervised statehood for Kosovo. In Belgrade, both President Tadić and Prime Minister Vojislav Koštunica fiercely rejected the plan as inadmissible.[4]

In the coming months, increasingly open messages kept arriving from the Western countries that Kosovo's independence was inevitable. For example, during his visit to Tirana on 10 July, US President George W. Bush explicitly said that Kosovo would be independent. After an additional round of unsuccessful negotiations and as they realized that because of opposition from Belgrade and the Russian veto the Ahtisaari plan would not pass in the UN Security Council, Western states took the decision to go ahead with a unilateral declaration of independence (Perritt 2010: 192). This development brought relations between Serbia and the West onto thin ice. However, in contrast to President Tadić, who tried to be consistent in defending Serbia's territorial integrity but was also pragmatic in his relations with the West, Prime Minister Koštunica saw the new situation in a far more dramatic light. In the speech he gave on St. Vitus' Day (28 June) in 2007, Koštunica made the analogy with what is symbolically the most important event in Serbian history: "A new, now Serbian–American Battle of Kosovo is taking place before the eyes of the entire world. On one side stands the authority of a great world power while on the other side stands Serbia, whose argument is law" (Krstić 2007).

This was a poster case of what psychiatrist Vamik Volkan termed "time collapse", a mnemonic technology of government strategically used by ethno-nationalist entrepreneurs in order to fuse collective emotions about shared past traumas or chosen glories with those pertaining to

4 At the moment when Ahtisaari brought his plan to Belgrade, Koštunica was technically still Prime Minister of the Government for which the mandate had run out; soon after that, however, he again became Prime Minister of the new Serbian Government constituted on 15 May 2007.

the present condition. Chosen traumas – and the battle of Kosovo as the biggest defeat in Serbian history no doubt falls under this category – influence collective identity to a much greater extent than chosen glories, because, as Volkan put it, they "bring with them powerful experiences of loss and feelings of humiliation, vengeance and hatred that trigger a variety of unconscious defense mechanisms that attempt to reverse these experiences and feelings" (Volkan 1997: 82).

Shortly thereafter, as a response to these developments, a policy of military neutrality started to take shape within the DSS. At the meeting of the Main Board held on 15 September 2007, its president, Vojislav Koštunica, posed a political and moral question:

> "How is it possible for Serbia to join the military alliance which first bombed us, then came to Kosovo with armed forces, and then - bypassing the Security Council and ignoring the UN – recognized the unilaterally proclaimed independence of an organic part of our country?" (Koštunica 2007)

At the same meeting, the party adopted a programme which openly opposed Serbia's membership in NATO; a month later it also adopted the *Declaration on Military Neutrality* (DSS 2007). It is interesting that this resolution does not even mention Kosovo. Instead, it only generally stipulates: "Military neutrality in relation to the existing military alliances is the best and most reliable way for Serbia to preserve its national sovereignty, integrity and independence [...]" (p. 363). It also proclaims that military neutrality does not exclude "the possibility of Serbia's cooperation with other countries in the interest of common and general security", while giving up said neutrality – as is stated in the resolution – would obligate Serbia to participate in wars that are not in its interest, limit its independence, endanger its security and prevent its internal development. Thus, DSS, which was one of the ruling parties, formally abandoned its former policy course towards Euro-Atlantic integration. This would be only the first phase in the policy cycle that would eventually lead to the adoption of military neutrality at the state level.

In the foreign policy sphere, the announcement of military neutrality by DSS was meant to be a message of friendship to Moscow from which Belgrade expected support in its legal and diplomatic battle to preserve its virtual sovereignty over Kosovo. The support was expected primarily within the Security Council, in which Russia as a permanent member with the power of veto could have prevented the amendment of UN Security Council Resolution 1244 in 1999. The document, among other things, defined Kosovo as part of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Domestically, Koštunica most likely estimated that this shift towards the policy of military neutrality could boost his falling approval ratings, as NATO membership was not very popular in Serbia.[5] What is more, when DSS adopted the resolution on military neutrality, it strongly resonated with the memories of the still vivid collective trauma of 1999.

The next task that was before Koštunica and his party was to turn a party decision into state policy. During October and November, the party actively promoted the idea among the public (Blic 2007; Glas Javnosti 2007a; Jočić 2007; Večernje novosti 2007). Then, in late December, Serbia's negotiating team for Kosovo, staffed mostly by Koštunica's people, provided all the caucuses in the Serbian Parliament with a draft resolution on the protection of integrity and sovereignty that also contained one sentence declaring military neutrality. Why did President Boris Tadić, whose party had advocated building close ties with NATO, agree to allow the inclusion of the clause on military neutrality in the draft of the resolution? Any account of this policy shift would have to factor into the equation the approaching presidential elections scheduled for 20 January. Tadić was probably yielding to his coalition partner Koštunica because he expected his support against the radical counter-candidate, Tomislav Nikolić, in the second round of the presidential election. In addition, according to media reports, President Tadić agreed to the military neutrality clause only after Koštunica gave up the adoption of a separate resolution that would request the EU member states not to recognize Kosovo (Isailović 2007). Finally, as NATO membership was not very popular and with not enough time to change this, President Tadić had no other option but to concede – at least temporarily – to Koštunica.

5 In December 2007, support for membership in NATO was only 28% (Glas Javnosti 2007b).

The National Assembly adopted the Resolution on 26 December 2007, stipulating as follows:

"Because of the overall role of NATO, from the illegal bombing of Serbia in 1999 carried out without a Security Council decision to Annex 11 of Ahtisaari's rejected plan, which stipulates that NATO is 'the ultimate authority' in 'independent Kosovo', the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia hereby passes the decision to declare the military neutrality of the Republic of Serbia in relation to the existing military alliances, until a possible referendum in which a final decision would be taken on the matter." (National Assembly 2007)

Unlike the case of the DSS party resolution, the motive for the adoption of military neutrality in this document is somewhat more clearly stated: it was the overall role of NATO in Kosovo and especially its military intervention in 1999. A supermajority of deputies (220 out of 250) voted for the Resolution. Only deputies of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina (LSV) were against it, as well as the representative of the Albanian minority, Riza Halimi. The MPs of the Alliance of Hungarians from Vojvodina (SVM) abstained. Parties that otherwise opposed military neutrality but still voted for the Resolution, soon after tried to trivialize it and explain it only as temporary confirmation of the *de facto* state of affairs rather than a long-term policy option. For example, Defence Minister Dragan Šutanovac, having voted for the Resolution, argued that "The Resolution only states the *de facto* state of affairs, and it is such that we are now militarily neutral; this however is not a decision that will be in effect forever and in the future" (MČ 2010). Šutanovac later changed his tone and stated that Koštunica's military neutrality policy "created confusion" (Nikolić-Djaković 2007). However, the policy has survived to this day, with no prospect of being revised in the near future.

Why has the policy of military neutrality survived?

Although many in Serbia claimed early on that military neutrality was unrealistic, costly and a short-lived project of Vojislav Koštunica, ultimately doomed to fail, it has nevertheless survived to this very day with no change in sight. Koštunica was removed from office in 2008 and even from the Parliament in 2014, but his military neutrality policy seems to be as firm as ever, at least at the level of political discourse.

All the political parties that voted for the Resolution in December 2007 – and they cover virtually the entire political spectrum – have rhetorically been entrapped in the claim that military neutrality is Serbia's response to the illegitimate role of NATO in Kosovo. As long as the victimhood narrative vis-a-vis NATO is not transformed, if not entirely dropped, it is hard to expect any policy transformation. As the years have passed by, the identity of Serbia as a neutral state has not only been declared and practised, but increasingly recognized by other states. It is to this period that this section now briefly turns.

In May 2008, the new elections sent Vojislav Koštunica and DSS into opposition; however SPS (formerly Milošević's party), which was also in favour of military neutrality, joined the new government led by the Democratic Party (DS). Although there was no mention of military neutrality in the keynote speech of the new Prime Minister, Mirko Cvetković, there was no discussion of NATO membership either (Cvetković 2008). The lack of a stance regarding these key strategic issues remained a feature of the security policy of Cvetković's government until the end of its term in June 2012. Aware of the immense unpopularity of NATO among Serbia's citizens due to the victimhood narratives laid down by Koštunica's politics of trauma, Mirko Cvetković's government openly avoided this topic. Military neutrality was not abandoned, but neither was it elaborated further in any of the strategic documents adopted at a later date, probably with a view to waiting for a better moment to revise the policy. Thus, neither the *National Security Strategy* (2009), *Defence Strategy* (2009), nor the *Defence White Paper* (2010), contain a single sentence about military neutrality. When the *National Security*

Strategy was in the process of being adopted, the then Defence Minister, Dragan Šutanovac, said that he expected "criticism from the extreme ends of the public" regardless of whether they favoured the first or the second option (Tanjug 2009). In other words, fearing that the negative image of NATO generated within the victimhood narratives and by the politics of trauma would spill over into personal and party ratings, even "the Atlanticists" in the government embraced military neutrality as the best temporary solution until more "favourable conditions" would allow this policy to be changed.

The fact that Cvetković's government avoided either endorsing or revising the military neutrality policy provided additional room for the opponents of NATO membership to continue to cultivate and develop – without any hindrance – the narrative of the Atlantic Alliance as a hostile entity that had victimized Serbia in the past and continued to do so to that day. Koštunica and his party, now in opposition, had free rein to instrumentalize the neglected script on NATO, the last chapter of which was written by the Milošević regime, to serve their partisan purposes and to shape it as they saw fit.[6] Thus, for example, in January 2010, a Proclamation was disseminated, originating from sources close to Koštunica, in which 200 prominent figures (mostly right-wing intellectuals) called for a referendum on Serbia's membership in NATO. The document claimed that:

> "By saying that 'Serbia is East to the West and West to the East',[7] Serbia's path, identity and position among the nations is defined. Serbia was never a member of any military alliance, East or West. And since it hasn't been the case so far, it would be unreasonable and detrimental to do so right now by joining the only outstanding military alliance. Remaining faithful to ourselves and to our traditions, militarily neutral Serbia is no exception." (Proglas 2010)

6 On the opposing side there were only a few intellectuals and NGOs, institutionally in weaker positions and therefore able to exert little influence on the public discourse.

7 An apocryphal sentence attributed to the founder of the Serbian Orthodox Church, allegedly formulated in a letter dating from 1221.

Military neutrality was thus presented as an integral part of a trans-historical meta-essence of the Serbian national identity rather than a matter of rational political choice. Serbia was portrayed in the document, along the lines of a widely shared geopolitical imagination on the Serbian right, as being positioned between the East and the West, destined to maintain an equidistance between the materially superior West and spiritually familiar Russia. Vojislav Koštunica, now a leader of the opposition party, knew that Serbia would not join NATO as Mirko Cvetković's government was completely inactive on this issue. He nevertheless continued incessantly to heat up this topic, hoping that strong public support for the policy of military neutrality would translate into support for his own party – DSS. That did not happen, but the support for NATO membership began to decline, dropping to 14% in 2012, almost half what it had been in December 2007.[8]

Most other parties also adopted a similar policy vis-à-vis NATO. According to the programme of the currently ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), "military neutrality is the only logical and reasonable solution for the Serbian state in terms of sharp confrontation between NATO and Russia".[9] After the defeat of Boris Tadić and his DS party in both the presidential and parliamentary elections held in May 2012, Tomislav Nikolić of SNS became the new President and parties that had in the meantime fully endorsed the policy of military neutrality now formed the government. On the other hand, the programme of the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), whose leader Ivica Dačić was appointed Prime Minister in July 2012, proclaimed that:

> "Taking into account the enormous human and material damage suffered by the ravages of war in the twentieth century – in the First and Second World Wars, in the civil war, in ethnic conflicts in the last decade of the last century, and in the NATO bombing – the Socialists believe that Serbia should be militarily neutral."[10]

8 Available at: http://www.bezbednost.org/Bezbednost/4926/Opada-podrska-gradjana-Srbije-evroatlantskim.shtml [accessed 2 June 2014].

9 Serbian Progressive Party, fundamental programme objectives. Available at: http://www.sns.org.rs/o-nama/program-srpske-napredne-stranke [accessed 2 June 2014].

10 Programme of the Socialist Party of Serbia, 11 December 2010. Available at: http://sps.org.rs/documents/PROGRAM%20SPS.pdf [accessed 2 June 2014].

In March 2014, new elections took place and the SNS achieved a landslide victory, winning an absolute majority in the Serbian Parliament. Given the overarching discourse, the SNS political programme and public opinion, it can be expected that Serbia's military neutrality is here to stay for quite some time. That the neutral role identity is being consolidated has most vividly been expressed during the recent crisis in Ukraine. Faced with pressure to take sides, Serbia has decided to be neutral vis-à-vis the Ukrainian conflict, perceived as being fought by proxy between Russia and the West. The text below sets out the ramifications of Serbia's neutrality in the future for its relationships with NATO, the EU and the Western Balkan region.

The effects and challenges of Serbia's military neutrality

As has been shown above, military neutrality has a strong emotional resonance in general political discourse in Serbia. However, it is worth noting that it has had a somewhat different impact on the operational side of Serbia's security and defence policy. In a nutshell, since the policy has never been elaborated, its substance does not go beyond the mere fact that Serbia does not seek NATO membership. However, its effects on the operational side of Serbia's security and defence policy are multiple. First, the declaration of military neutrality has not significantly disrupted Serbia's participation in the NATO PfP. Serbia joined the programme in December 2006, its Presentation Document of July 2007 stating that: "...by its active participation in the PfP, the Republic of Serbia is ready to contribute maximally to the peaceful development of the region, strengthening good neighbourly relations and resolving all disputed issues through dialogue and cooperation" (Republic of Serbia 2007: 4). Moreover, on 1 October 2008, Serbia and NATO signed the Information Security Agreement, a precondition for Serbia's participation in the activities of the PfP, as well as for the opening of the Mission of the Republic of Serbia in the NATO Headquarters in

Brussels.[11] Between 2009 and 2012, Serbia implemented three individual partnership programmes, while the presentation document of the Individual Partnership Action Plan was adopted in July 2011 (Republic of Serbia 2011). In addition, Serbia is participating in the Planning and Review Process (PARP) programme, which admittedly has been blocked since November 2011 due to the disagreement of Albania regarding an Article in the *National Security Strategy* in which the unilateral declaration of independence of Kosovo is defined as the ultimate threat (Tanjug 2013). This perception concerning security is repeated not only in frequent statements by state officials but also in the majority of strategic documents that Serbia has adopted in the field of foreign, security and defence policy.[12] Finally, Serbia has fully professionalized and reformed its military according to NATO standards and military neutrality does not seem to have been a crucial obstacle in that direction. On the contrary, NATO assisted military reforms in Serbia through the Serbia–NATO Defence Reform Group, established in 2006 (Nič and Cingel 2014: 37).

Second, thus far, military neutrality has not hampered Serbia's relationships with the EU. Serbia was granted candidate status in March 2012 and opened accession negotiations in January 2014. Over the years, Serbia's military neutrality may even have pushed Serbia closer to the EU, in particular its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). This was confirmed by the appointment of Tanja Miščević, a well-known EU expert, as state secretary in the Ministry of Defence in 2010.[13] Serbia's willingness to take part in the CSDP was expressed in a number of documents and on countless occasions. Moreover, Serbia concluded two important agreements with the EU to initiate its engagement with the CSDP: the Agreement on Security Procedures for the Exchange and Protection of Classified Information on 26 May 2011 and the Agreement on Establishing a Framework for the Participation of the Republic of Serbia in European Union Crisis Management Operations on 23 June 2011. In the spring of 2012, membership negotiations were commenced with the

11 The agreement was ratified by the National Assembly of Serbia on 5 July 2011.

12 "National Strategy of Serbia for the Accession of Serbia and Montenegro" (The Government of Serbia and Montenegro 2005); "National Programme for EU integration" (Government of Serbia 2008); "National Security Strategy" (National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia 2009); "Defence Strategy" (National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia 2009).

13 In September 2013, she was appointed the chief negotiator for the Accession of Serbia to the EU.

European Defence Agency, while the Serbian Armed Forces made their first ever contribution to a CSDP mission. Serbia is currently participating in two EU missions: it has five members with the EU Training Mission Uganda/ Somalia and two members in the naval operation EUNAVFOR in Somalia. In 2012, Serbia's Ministry of Defence was, as state secretary Miščević put it: "...the only ministry in the government of Serbia which had defined positions for the accession negotiations with the EU".[14] In May 2013, a decision was taken also to include Serbia in the planned EU mission in Mali, with no more than 13 participating members.[15]

Having said that, military neutrality as a policy has at times been questioned as a policy hardly compatible with full EU membership by its proponents and opponents alike. For instance, DSS argues that:

> "[…] military neutrality is endangered by European integration. NATO has a key role to play in the common security and defence policy of the EU […]. If a Serb dies for foreign interests as a professional soldier or as a recruit does not essentially change the fact that he dies as a mercenary, for the sake of foreign interests. The dam against such anti-national policies could only be the political neutrality of Serbia." (DSS 2014).

Most recently, this issue has come under the spotlight during the crisis in Ukraine. On the one hand, Ukraine supported Serbia's claim for its territorial integrity over Kosovo and expected Serbia to reciprocate when the Crimea was annexed by the Russian Federation. Moreover, as an EU candidate state, Serbia was expected to align with EU-led sanctions imposed on Moscow as a punishment for its activities in the Crimea, but also in eastern Ukraine. On the other hand, Serbia is a strategic partner of Russia with which it has signed a number of important deals, not least in the energy sector. From the very outset, Serbia decided not to take sides in order to maintain good relations with both. As Prime Minister Ivica Dačić mentioned in early March 2014, Serbia has a long-term goal to harmonize its foreign policy with the EU, but for the time being, "In spite of the expectations of the EU, Serbia remains in a neutral position towards

14 Interview with the author, 1 June 2012.

15 http://www.parlament.gov.rs/upload/archive/files/cir/pdf/ostala_akta/2013/RS25-13.pdf

the crisis in Ukraine" (Srna 2014). Thus, even though Koštunica's party failed to pass the parliamentary threshold in the elections held in 2014, its proposed policy of political neutrality has become the official position of Serbia, at least vis-à-vis the Ukrainian Crisis.

Third, military neutrality has not adversely affected the participation of Serbia in regional security initiatives, such as the Regional Cooperation Council, South Eastern European Defence Ministerial Initiative and many others. Although many were initially concerned about the potential consequences and implications of Serbia's military neutrality, it has not caused any significant turbulence in the region either and has been accepted with understanding. The only exception is Bosnia and Herzegovina for which Belgrade's policy of military neutrality has had somewhat more important and arguably destabilizing consequences. Bosnia and Herzegovina has been participating in an intensive dialogue on membership of NATO since 2008 and received a conditioned invitation for a Membership Action Plan (MAP) in April 2010.[16] In addition, the President of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, announced a referendum on NATO membership which, given the relatively low public support of only 37%, will likely end in a negative response (Vukićević 2013).

Fourth, the policy of military neutrality has opened up more room for maintaining some kind of special relations between Serbia and Russia. In the economic sphere, this refers primarily to the Energy Treaty signed between Serbia and Russia in Moscow on 25 January 2008. The treaty encompasses the issue of the South Stream gas pipeline that is supposed to transit through Serbia, as well as the sale of 51% of the shares of the Petroleum Industry of Serbia to a Russian company, *Gazprom Neft*. This agreement is in violation of Serbia's obligations set out in the Energy Community Treaty signed between the EU and the countries of the region in October 2005, as well as with European regulations, the so-called Second and Third Energy Packages. In the future, Serbia will have to harmonize its energy deal with Russia with the European regulations providing for free competition (this will be part of negotiating chapter 15) if it plans to gain full membership.

16 Prior to this, Milorad Dodik had announced a referendum on possible NATO membership on several occasions in the Republic of Srpska. http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/11/Region/1103106/Dodik%3A+Ne+u+NATO+bez+Srbije.html

As far as political relations are concerned, Russia, as a permanent member of the Security Council, represents a key ally in the battle to preserve the formal integrity and sovereignty of Kosovo. In the area of security cooperation, Russia and Serbia have signed a number of very important agreements, including the agreement on the establishment of the Serbian–Russian humanitarian base in Nis (in 2009) and the agreement on the joint development of complex combat systems (Savković 2012). In addition, in April 2013 Serbia became the only European country that had joined, as an observer, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization of Collective Security Treaty (ODKB), a military alliance led by the Russian Federation (Đukanović and Gajić 2012). Finally, in May 2013 Serbia and Russia signed the Declaration on Strategic Partnership (Đukanović and Živojinović 2011). Among other things, this long-awaited document provides for closer cooperation in the fields of interior affairs, defence and foreign policy, as well as "consideration of the initiative on the conclusion of the Treaty on European Security" which the President proposed in 2008.[17] Should this agreement be signed – and there is presently no interest in the West to do so – European states that are currently militarily neutral, including Serbia, will probably have to remain permanently neutral, even if at some point they no longer wish to be.

Challenges ahead

What is the future of the military neutrality of Serbia and what are the challenges that will arise out of this policy? Advocates of NATO membership often emphasize the economic costs of military neutrality. The key argument is that neutrality is very costly and can be afforded only by highly developed countries – and Serbia is not one of them. Some militarily neutral states, such as Turkmenistan for example, do indeed spend a much greater portion of their GDP on defence than average NATO members. This argument, however, is only partially

17 The draft agreement is available at: http://www.rts.rs/upload/storyBoxFileData/2013/05/24/3325874/Deklaracija%20o%20strateskom%20partnerstvu.pdf [accessed on 2 June 2014].

correct. Namely, due to a more favourable post-Cold War security environment, militarily neutral states in Europe on average spend less on defence than NATO members (Bernauer, Koubi and Ernst 2009). In spite of these trends, it is very difficult to reach a conclusion – at least on the basis of comparative experience – as to whether neutrality will be more costly for Serbia than NATO membership. Such an equation is incomplete without taking into consideration the indirect costs and benefits of membership. For example, in the central European and Baltic countries, foreign direct investment and GDP increased dramatically in the years after these countries joined NATO (Karaulac 2009). It should of course be borne in mind that for these countries, EU and NATO accession processes occurred simultaneously. It is therefore very difficult to ascribe these favourable economic indicators solely to either of the processes. What is certain is that membership in NATO contributed to the improvement of the overall investment climate in the new member states and that the situation would probably not be much different in the case of Serbia.

Apart from this, it is sometimes pointed out that military neutrality could be an obstacle to Serbia's European integration. The argument most often heard in public is that all the post-Communist countries first joined NATO and then the EU. Therefore, this argument reads that although membership in NATO is not a formal requirement for membership in the EU, it is an informal one. It is true that no post-Communist country has remained neutral and still become an EU member. However, as the EU has six militarily neutral or non-aligned states, three of which became members after the end of the Cold War (i.e. Cyprus, Malta and Austria), this argument does not seem to be well founded, at least formally. In addition, even EU officials have on many occasions pointed out that EU and NATO accession are two formally separate processes and that Serbia is under no obligation to join one organization in order to become a member of the other.

There is, however, another potential challenge that may arise from the policy of military neutrality in relation to the European integration of Serbia. It should be borne in mind that although the EU is not formally a defence alliance, it is a political alliance and as of 1999, it has been developing its defence and security policy. The Lisbon Treaty

introduced two clauses that moved the EU another step closer to forming a defence alliance. One is the "Solidarity Clause", effective in the event of a terrorist attack or disaster, and the other is the "Mutual Defence Clause", dealing with potential external attacks. Some neutral member states feared that by adopting the Lisbon Treaty, they would be sucked into a military alliance through a back door. That is why a formulation specifying that the above provisions shall not affect the defence policy of individual states, whether neutral or NATO members, was included in the text of the treaty. It served formally to preserve the neutrality of Sweden, Finland, Austria, Ireland, Cyprus and Malta, but it also satisfied the needs of EU member states to integrate themselves further into the field of defence and security. Essentially, according to many criteria, today's EU has actually surpassed NATO regarding the level of integration, not only in the field of economics and politics, but also in the field of security and defence, as evidenced for example in the work of the European Defence Agency (Parnakova 2009). To the extent that this trend will continue, it will be increasingly difficult for neutral EU member states to maintain even a semblance of their military neutrality and in this context, Serbia will be no exception. The recent crisis in Ukraine has demonstrated well that Serbia's neutrality, currently defined not only as a decision to stay out of military alliance but also to maintain some sort of geopolitical equidistance between Brussels and Moscow, is not compatible with EU membership.

Finally, with this self-imposed neutrality, Serbia will lose the opportunity to develop strategic relationships with the most powerful European power – the US – and to influence decisions made within NATO regarding the Western Balkans. As the other countries in the region will likely become NATO members sooner or later, it means that Serbia will remain isolated in its own environment, at least when it comes to defence, which could inflame the revival of its revisionist tendencies in the future. Maintaining good relations with Russia can only partially compensate for this loss of influence, bearing in mind that Russia, apart from its position on the UN Security Council and instruments of energy policy, does not have many ways in which to influence developments in the Western Balkans.

Conclusion

Until recently, Serbia had never historically been a military neutral state. The Democratic Party of Serbia, led by the former Prime Minister Vojislav Koštunica, was the first to adopt the policy of military neutrality in October 2007 at the party level. This was a response to the failure to find a mutually acceptable solution to the Kosovo crisis during the negotiations led by UN special envoy Martti Ahtisaari in Vienna. Shortly thereafter, Vojislav Koštunica translated a party decision into a state policy through a declaration of neutrality included in the Parliamentary Resolution on territorial integrity adopted on 26 December 2007. The Resolution states that Serbia declares military neutrality because of the overall role of NATO, from its military intervention in 1999 to its purported endorsement of Kosovo's independence. This makes Serbia's military neutrality essentially different from all other European cases: it is driven by the collective memory of NATO intervention against Serbia, portrayed as an illegal aggression in support of Kosovo's secession. Although the policy has never been mentioned or elaborated on in any other strategic document since the adoption of the Resolution, military neutrality has continued to be the official policy, supported by the great majority of citizens as well as political parties.

The policy of military neutrality has had a multiplicity of effects on Serbia's foreign and security policy. On the one hand, the policy may have slowed down but has not prevented cooperation between Serbia and NATO through the PfP programme. Had Serbia sought NATO membership, it would probably have reformed its armed forces more quickly and more thoroughly in line with NATO standards. However, in the past decade, Serbia has still managed to abolish conscription and professionalize and reform its armed forces according to NATO standards, indeed sometimes with its direct support. Also, military neutrality has not been an obstacle for Serbia in advancing its EU membership bid, including participation in its CSDP.

On the other hand, military neutrality has facilitated the deepening of a strategic partnership with Moscow. When the Ukraine crisis erupted in

early 2014, Serbia decided to be one of the very few European states to remain neutral and refused to join EU-led sanctions against Russia and its allies in Ukraine. Up until 2014, Serbia's neutrality was interpreted as a decision to stay away from military alliances, in particular from NATO. Now, its interpretation was extended to cover also a political conflict between the EU and Russia over the ongoing civil war in Ukraine.[18] Serbia's position stood in a stark contrast to Serbia's EU membership bid, as all candidate countries are expected to align with EU foreign policy, including economic sanctions. Although the EU initially expressed limited understanding for the specific position of Serbia, it nevertheless warned the government in Belgrade about the unsustainability of such a position (Milinković 2014). Serbia has recently begun accession negotiations and the issue of foreign policy harmonization with the EU will soon be on the agenda when Chapter 31, covering Foreign, Security and Defence policy, is opened. As Serbia progresses on its path towards EU membership, it will increasingly face pressure to revise its current equidistant stance towards Brussels and Moscow. This is related not only to close alignment with EU foreign policy, but also alignment with EU regulations in the energy sector.

It seems that not only the ruling coalition but also the ruling Progressive Party is divided on this issue. On the one hand, Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić prefers a pro-European course, although not Atlanticist, as he has stressed many times that military neutrality is here to stay. On the other hand, Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić from the Socialist Party and the President of Serbia Tomislav Nikolić from SNS prefer a more balanced approach that will not alienate Moscow. On the discursive level, the victimhood narrative concerning NATO intervention in 1999 is still unchallenged. Decision makers would have a hard time significantly revising the policy of military neutrality, even if they wanted to. However, in the future, as EU membership accession moves ahead, it will become ever more difficult to sustain or develop this policy. As a consequence, Serbia's decision makers will increasingly be caught between the rock of foreign policy pragmatism and the hard place of victimhood narratives of the past.

18 It is worth noting that the concept of either temporary or permanent military neutrality legally does not refer to civil wars but only to international conflicts and military alliances.

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